Homework

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By Wing-Yee Tong

Abstract

My working methods build upon an ongoing interest in examining how identities and understanding are formed through the construction of personal and collective histories in shifting interplays of lived events, social conditions, places and mediating objects. Many of my efforts focus on processes of cultural location, on observing and questioning actions of learning, appropriating, acculturating and hybridizing in order to "make home." I was fascinated by locally handcrafted objects, domestically and abundantly produced doilies, which motivated my interest in needlework, sweat work and other historically under-recognized, gendered forms of labour. Using vernacular objects and forms that register as goods and cast-offs in cycles of commodity production and consumption, I investigate the possibilities of art practice—extra and intra studio—to respond to emergent questions of locality and sense of belonging, to destabilize essential notions of cultural membership, and to explore issues of artist agency in capitalist culture.

Contents

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Being away from friends and family provided special impetus for me to take the time to listen to stories from my family and from people I met in Saskatoon. The personal and situational concreteness of these memories and the generosity of sharing in many encounters inspired my working process and gave my thinking contextual ballast. I would like to acknowledge everyone who has been supportive and who have made my two years here possible.

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Homework

Introduction: Learning through making

"Homework" feels like an encryption for compressing together multiple processes of creating and learning. The practice of making things, of tactile play with materials, of effecting and witnessing layers of accretion and erasure is for me a vital means of making connections both analytic and poetic[1]. Ideas and queries accumulate in fortuitous and indeterminate results alongside tangible growths and discards on the studio floor. To reduce these processes to findings belies both the material concreteness and the intuitive experience of making objects and conceptual connections that often mutually feed one another. Significantly, what guided my work was also the challenge by Joan Borsa in her *Feminism, Activism and Art* seminar to find ways to embrace, rather than insistently suppress, the multiplicity of our intellectual curiosities and to heed the "thorns in our sides," to listen to intuition when it signals what bothers us.

Responding to the ways that cultural worldviews inform, play off against, make invisible and illuminate one another, I have made objects and gestures and staged participatory experiments as means of paying attention, as steps in engaging my practice as a platform for open-sourced learning, and as grounds for testing understanding, methods, materials and circumstances. Thus, in place of elegantly reduced conclusions I present a rhizomatic network of intentions, actions and observations. An accessible analogy for this process is the making of soup by slow boiling, the soup's qualities changing as new ingredients are stirred into the pot.

The installation of *Homework* is a deliberate staging of encounters between objects that register as finished artworks, the residue of their production, works in progress, banal

[1] To quote Luis Jacob, "The studio is that living realm where you, the artist, never know for sure when the artwork has been completed, because the rationale for making the work is created along with the work itself." From "Groundless in the Museum: Anarchism and the Living Work of Art," last page in unpaginated publication.

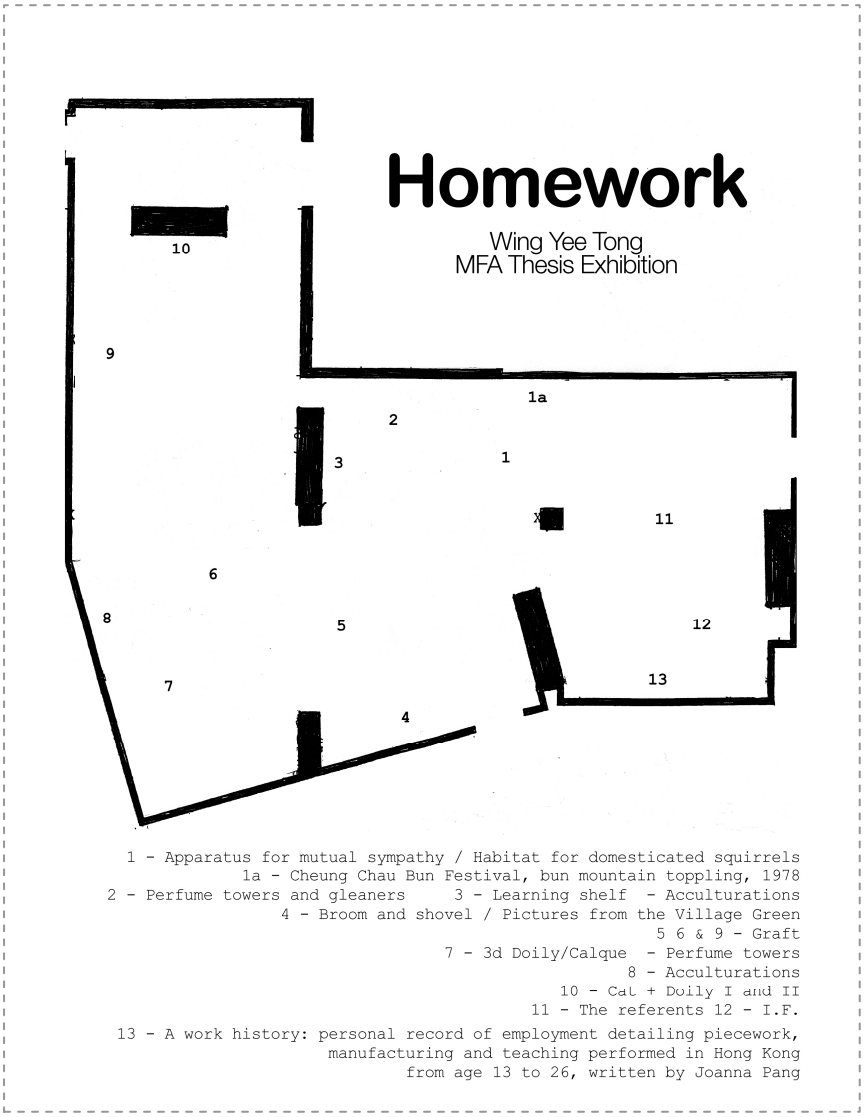
objects of the household or school ground (some lightly transformed), and the audience. There is a visible violation of categories in material vocabularies, scale and display conventions that complicate distinctions between what is conventionally recognizable as artwork and what is not. The sculptural groupings, intimately drawn together or slyly set in juxtaposition, coexist in a spatialized exchange intending to evoke dialogic relationships as the visitor navigates the actual installation. It is, on my part, a wholehearted attempt to create an atmosphere that mixes the strange with the familiar, in an ostensibly chaotic interaction between works that allows for articulation of the complex relationships and contradictory distinctions between process, research, product and presentation. Part of my aim, to quote feminist writer and art historian Griselda Pollock, is to create an installation that "resembles the way artists think about art and the ways even nonartists absorb and remember their experiences with art." (Pollock, 131)

The installation references craft conceptually and materially, relating specifically to handcrafts of domestic and folk production and common experiences of elementary school learning. These two contexts map analogically, first, the erasures that accompany gendered reproductive labour, and second, the framing of informal learning (in my role of a playful beginner) as a legitimate stance for creation and inquiry, while attenuating socially conditioned deference for the proprietary knowledge of specialists and professionals that customarily exclude and denigrate outsiders as "amateurs."

Given the structure of spatial relationships and visual cues formalized within the installation, and in consideration of the multiple audiences and interpretations for this work, I chose to open the exhibition without an authorial narrative. My intention is to put into practice the potential of art to provoke discursive encounters with the cultural lenses, operative assumptions and ideological frameworks audiences bring to the gallery. I posit that audiences can be trusted with the freedom to assemble what becomes legible through their active viewing.[2] What follows is more or less a chronological narrative illustrating

[2] Griselda Pollock proposed in an essay an imaginary exhibition to restoratively and creatively challenge the canon, to present works as "traces and events in histories that are social, aesthetic, and psychic." Her formulation of aims and means resonates powerfully

my creative processes, motivations and the knowledge development behind these projects. How the guiding impulses I have outlined are implicated in aesthetic decisions will be the focus of my discussions on specific works.



Map of *Homework* available to gallery visitors

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with my intent for *Homework*. She writes: "The very best lessons of formalist analysis and social historical attentiveness to cultural production would be incorporated so deeply as to be invisible. Yet such approaches would also be transformed provocatively by a feminist and psychoanalytical vocabulary of encounter, dialogue, and difference,--that would make what the viewer was invited to see become strange, recalcitrant, difficult, and refreshingly perplexing." (Pollock, 137)

Dislocation, place, and *The Village Green is my favourite place because every time I come here, I meet someone*

Having experienced a number of migrations—leaving as a child the densely urbanized landscape of British-ruled Hong Kong and immigrating to a suburb of Toronto, living as a student in Florence, and then as a new resident of Saskatoon, I found myself inhabiting again the role of a stranger, in the wake of another rupture with my past and not yet a member of "here." In response to this sense of dislocation and not feeling rooted geographically or culturally, I carried out various excursions to familiarize and locate myself, to satisfy my preoccupation with "making home."

The Escape Artist. 2008

An old friend who had lived in Saskatoon for a year showed me the Village Green Thrift Store run by the Mennonite Central Committee as the "best place" to find furniture and other things I might need because things there were affordably priced. Within the first week, as I began gathering materials for making art, I found myself back at the store. Somewhere between the dress and crochet patterns and rows of neatly bundled fabrics, I ran into my first new friend in the city. And so it happened many times that whenever I shopped there, I met by chance people I had either met recently, students from the university, other artists in the community, or strangers I had never met before, with whom almost as often, I ended up in conversation. The store seemed to be a warm, unassuming place that helped me to settle into a new city. There was a visible level of care for the secondhand objects and materials awaiting renewed use. My initial idea of making pictures for the store was intended as a process of relating my art practice to a place I was now locating myself, and

of learning about the framing and relationship of art objects to the embedded habits of collecting visibly manifest here.

Although I had been pursuing art making and the possibility of making (an almost certainly precarious, if even probable) livelihood by it for a number of years, I had become discontented with the position I had found myself and other artists friends occupying. As small producers of goods whose artwork, if we have been lucky, got placed into a commercial or semi-public, presumably merit based gallery system, our work could then be seen by select groups of people with the privilege of valuing and/or the means of purchasing. To sell for a price determined by "the market" for a standard fifty-fifty percentage split between artist and retailer was, we were to assume, the most desirable end for our work.

The accumulated feeling after many repetitions of this process was no small amount of alienation from my work. These questions recurred: Why am I doing this? Who gets to see the work and how do they relate to it? What do they get out of it? Why strive to cultivate or make something new in order that only people of affluence may possess it, and no one else may get to see it again? In a broader context, what meaning was there to continue participation in the production of these objects of luxury? What control if any can I have over these conditions?

Picture wall at the Village Green Thrift Store

Many of these frustrations stemmed from my inheriting western modernist myths of self-sufficiency, objective distance and aesthetic insularity. Of this legacy the artist and critic Suzi Gablik wrote in 1995: "Autonomy, we now see, has condemned art to social impotence by turning it into just another class of objects for marketing and consumption" (74). I decided to make the Village Green project an experiment in

challenging and re-orienting those conditions under which my artwork had been produced and viewed, and enlisted the store manager's collaboration, presenting her with my most crowd-pleasing drawings to gain her confidence. In re-integrating my drawings into the store's picture wall and other art objects' display and commercial promotion within the Village Green's internal organization of sorting and valuing, I intended to remodel the position of my role and my work in an exchange economy to fit in with an operation where profit-motive was tempered by choice of whom to serve: here, residents in the local neighborhood, lower-income earners, artists, families, bargain hunters from a range of ages and ethnicities. In the Village Green, I had a venue in which my art practice could find an unintended audience.

The readymade materials I selected from the Village Green and flea market included framed prints, prayers and magazine pages, hand-crocheted doilies, paint-by-numbers, animal figurines. These household objects provided a rich source of visual and material ideas as well as an aggregate glimpse into the aesthetic choices and cultural production of people who had preceded my presence here. I made things from objects that had already had a history, had been cared for or created by someone else, had superannuated in fashion, been discarded, embedding its place in class stratigraphy in being deemed objects of little cultural significance.

Spread the Good Word, 2010

Over the course of three weeks that I was "on the market" I installed twenty pieces, "restocking" as some pieces found release upon being purchased. The work consisted of framed drawings, mono-prints, collages and reproductions ("nostalgic pictures"), along with assemblages and plaster sculptures, each discreetly bearing a fluorescent "Made in Saskatoon" sticker. I had intended to drop in for the project duration, be incognito like other shoppers but open to interaction. The project's meaning and parameters were re-oriented however, when I was given the unexpected honour and premium space of the

entire “feature wall,” to be graced as well with a mug shot photograph of me as “Featured Artist.”

In discussing art that takes as its realm of working the issue of human relations, Nicolas Bourriaud wrote of such practices as “learning to inhabit the world in a better way.” He wrote in *Relational Aesthetics*: “[T]he role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist.” (13) I continue to be interested in his idea of the artwork as a social “interstice,” as an experimental site of communality and resistance suggesting contexts of human relations “removed from the law of profit.”

The Village Green project was significant as a learning process in negotiating contradictions between my intentions as an artist and normative understandings of what constitutes “art,” my own and those at work within the site where I was situating my work. Making my practice in a social space other than those framed by the “neutral” white cube of gallery spaces opened up interesting dynamics and challenges into operative biases in quotidian social functioning. The project allowed me to clarify my positioning on some issues: that enacting meaningful social bonds was a significant motivation for and something I wanted to continue to build into my art practice. Simultaneously, my life experience crossing cultures and observing the effects on the lives of my family has created a primary desire for significant change in social relations, and for this to be premised on something other than exchange economics and commodification, which do not miraculously effect the transformations I seek. It was not enough to “let my work speak for me” without other actions or strategies to challenge habitual ways of relating. A project built on conceptually cogent ideas could still complicate intentions and highlight alienating conditions when they fail in unexpected ways. It was necessary to be mindful of the value of my relationship of care to the objects I fashioned when formulating critical challenge on other fronts as part of the installations.

Broom and Shovel: Pictures from the Village Green, 2011

Broom and Shovel is installed in the exhibition as a postscript to the Village Green project. It comprises of these objects: a needlepoint from the thrift store, an unsold sculptural wall-hanging, a collection of mirrors and mirror cognates assembled from frames, recycled food wrappers and tinfoil, a painted wood slab and mixed media drawings to compose a "picture wall" incorporated into the larger exhibition. The collection operates as a return infiltration of the institutional art space. It also offers a succinct preview of my thematic interests in domestic craft, in representations and my anarchic material choices appearing elsewhere in the exhibition.

Two other interventions took place in exchange-based contexts. "Not for Sale Today" was a poll I staged when the Caswell Hill neighborhood organized its annual *Art in the Park* outdoor exhibition and sale, where visitors stopping by my "Not for Sale Today" lawn sign and soapbox station could sit with me on my art, an astroturf doily, and render their responses to questions related to "What is the job of an artist?"

Noticing the ubiquitous ambiguous "ethnic" designations at local supermarkets for food items including canned juice and vegetables, and as a way of sharing my newly cultivated cooking skills, I delivered "Friendly Gook Food" as a nested performance within a weeklong tenancy of MFA students using the *Gordon Snelgrove Gallery* as an open art laboratory. Throughout a four-day duration I prepared and served for visitor consumption set menu items for lunch. Reconstituting recipes from my parents, I made my mom's four-mushroom tofu stew, Hong Kong-style egg tarts, and my dad's hand-wrapped wontons. Eaters were requested to contribute their own recipes to my "MFA Studio Rat Cookbook" and to add their communal love to an all-day slow-boil "stone soup" made with their donated ingredients and leftover broth from my wontons.

These ephemeral and sociable projects were energizing apertures into ways of working beyond the sometimes confining isolation of the studio, where experiments of another tempo were proceeding.

Materiality and *Mutual Sympathy*

I. F., 2010

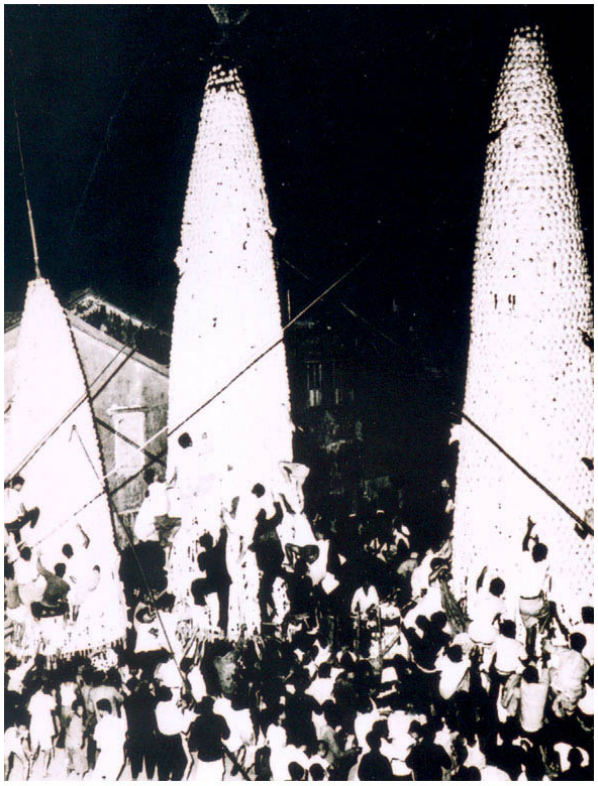
In the optimistic glow of arrival in a new working space, I set myself to an important directive: To play with the materials I had my students play and work with from my past days of working as an art instructor. This was preceded by much anticipation held in check throughout the times I had worked with children, to be an enabler and occasional technician, to watch in wonder as their enthusiasm and play unfolded in countless material expressions. Thus I gathered in profusion and worked with materials and techniques I had been familiar with on the job: plasticene, papier mâché, pipe cleaners, cut up remnants of old clothes, stuffing socks into new and desirable shapes. The first sculpture project was a bodily, root system-like "chandelier" sewn from numerous pairs of identical "magic gloves," old sweatshirts, a found foam

mattress and a pillow. In the course of making this work I sought a visual balance between the symmetric ordering of branching and the organic feeling of more irregular forms. I was brought back to a conversation years ago with an exchange student who was an exceptionally prolific maker. With anything at hand, he could tinker and transform materials into images. At the time I told him I had not felt the desire to *make* anything for a while, reasoning that I had no need, when we lived in a world of such material abundance, where every object imaginable seemed to have been manufactured in multiple configurations, shades and flavours. I was suffering from the feeling of being inundated. I had then in my hand a small metallic keychain in the shape of an alien with bulging eyes and articulable limbs, at which he looked with amusement. In the course of sewing, cutting, knotting, stacking, and testing the fastness of sticky tack, I felt rehabilitated by working with my hands, grounded by tactile contact with materials.

The gloves I used for the blue chandelier were factory made in China. On the sales rack they were hung uniformly in rows, displaying multitudes of pressed teal fingers. In the process of using them I thought about the fact that each was meant to be stretched into individuation by different hands, and that every unvarying pair had already passed through the hands of those who had produced them. The character of the gloves' sameness is concomitant with their economic accessibility and eventual disposability. Their reshaping through my hands into unrepentantly irregular forms was a symbolic ritual of resistance against homogenization.

I had brought to Saskatoon a dollar store squirrel for no reason other than an ambivalent attraction to its kitschy aesthetic. Of this squirrel I began producing multiple plaster copies while learning the fabrication process of mould making. Perhaps I was also missing Toronto, which had a teeming squirrel population that was absent in Saskatoon. Coincidentally, the week I arrived, my partner in Toronto rescued a fallen squirrel from his balconied apartment building. This event spurred a rash of internet readings and exchanges of information on squirrels. My search results on Google unexpectedly bifurcated into two categories: advertising for pet squirrel products and advertising for pest control. This dichotomy of pest or pet, of eradication or domestication for human

benefit bespoke a mode of thinking based on the rhetoric of domination, intolerance and control. I tried to imagine what kind of life a rescued squirrel would live if actually kept as a pet under such management principles, in any of the new condo developments overtaking downtown Toronto. These musings would cohere with another image of social adjustment.



Cheung Chau's bun mountain toppling, 1978

The "Cheung Chau Buns Festival" takes place in May annually on the island of Cheung Chau in Hong Kong. Residents construct three "bun mountains" outside the Pak Tai Temple with armatures between 40 to 60 feet tall fashioned from bamboo and covered entirely with steamed buns. At the stroke of midnight the men would rush the towers in a torrent, displaying their agility, strength and speed in attaining as many buns as possible, the greatest honour being accorded to the first man to climb to the summit to attain the bun at the top. The contest had existed for over a century before it was banned in 1978 after a tower toppled over and injured many people. The "Cheung Bahl Sahn"—literally "bun-snatching mountain" competition was somewhat forgotten but brought back to the Hong Kong public's attention by the animated film "My Life as McDull," whose narrative reference to the competition brought on such a wave of collective nostalgia and public demand that the competition resumed in 2005, with the towers supported by steel structures and climbers sporting safe climbing gear. A ritual steeped in the tradition of appeasing the gods to keep pirates at bay, the contest was utterly spectacular and celebratory. As a former inhabitant of Hong Kong who left at a time when it was still

viewed as a free-market miracle of laissez-faire economic policies, the spectacle of bread and climbing arrested for me a symbolic image of fear of want and frenzying competition at play on the shadow side of capitalism's promises of progress and prosperity.

Thinking about domestication, social adjustment to urban living and programming for competition, I looked at designs of indoor climbing gyms and the vernacular forms of pet paraphernalia: pet chews, training wheels, scratch toys, and most indelibly, carpet-covered cat habitats, their forms reminiscent of modernist sculptural objects.

The *Mutual sympathy apparatus: habitat for domesticated squirrels* is a tower structure channeling the narrative of the condo-bound squirrel, with a tongue-in-cheek reference to the bread and climbing of the Cheung Chau Buns Festival. My intention was to collide the utopian morphology of the modernist tower structure with a sense of the provisional evident in the ingenuity born of day-to-day negotiation of circumstances, habit and chance, to push the overall aesthetic into an exuberant display of miscellaneous amenities for physical training and social adjustment.

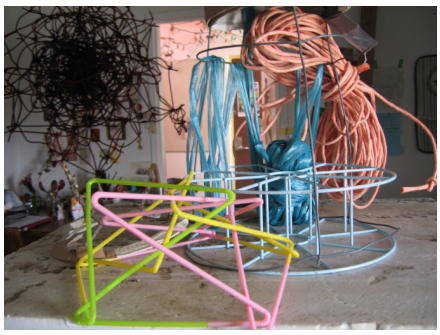
I bricolaged materials not normally seen together, selecting objects that could resemble, to some people, rummaging in the wastebasket. The aesthetic of the squirrel tower aimed to complicate boundaries of good taste and sophistication at work in mass-marketed solutions for home improvements, which are embedded within a larger system at work in separating the materials of choice from the unwanted materials in our lives. Matter is regulated daily by our designating for disposal objects that were once functional or cherished. Tim Edensor characterizes as a morbid cycle of repetition, novelty and death the process of how the "newly fashionable consigns the previously modish to obsolescence." He writes,

> With the abundance of commodities, to avoid the endless piling up of previous artifacts from an increasingly recent past, an unwanted surplus must be discerned. […] Thus it is matter out of place, especially where it spills into and infects those […] spaces designed to disguise ambiguity, in which material elements (together with functions, social practices and forms of information) are discretely distributed and continuously regulated." (315)

Mutual sympathy apparatus: Habitat for domesticated squirrels, 2011

Consumerism, detritus, collection and memory

Under the paradigm of endless growth, relentless pressure for newer, faster, shinier objects obliterates lasting, responsible relationships with the material world. The departmentalization in consumer goods traffic, together with systems of regulatory disposal, constrains what substances we see, touch, use and know. The expedience of urban living effects a general removal from understanding of lived relations to materials, making it seem unnecessary to wonder how something is made, where it comes from, through whose hands. Some of these considerations have come into my studio process. I have tried to pay attention to the trails of my own consumption, to apprehend more thoughtfully the tenure and trajectories of "stuff," and to strategize the use of secondhand and castoff objects.



Bricolage in process

As a result, in my installation practices I have often found efforts to draw attention to groupings of things that "do not belong together,"—be it the haphazard sorting of church basement bazaars or representations of clutter, messes, and material ruin—what Georges Perec called his "fortune"[3]—to harbor a great deal of

[3] I would like to share with you two examples. The first from Georges Perec's "The Bedroom" in *Species of spaces*: "The passage of time (my History) leaves behind a residue that accumulates: photographs, drawings, the corpses of long since dried-up felt-pens, shirts, non-returnable glasses and returnable glasses, cigar wrappers, tins, erasers, postcards, books, dust and knick-knacks: this is what I call my fortune."

The second is an extraordinary description of a domestic space in the house of Pliushkin, a character in Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls* whose life had been overtaken by an excessive preoccupation with material accumulation. In short, a hoarder:

"It seemed as if a general housecleaning were going on and all the furniture had been piled up here for the time being. There was even a broken chair standing on one of the tables and, side by side with it, a clock whose pendulum had stopped and to which a spider had already cunningly attached its web. Here, too, with one of its sides leaning against the wall, stood a dresser with antiquated silver, small carafes, and Chinese porcelain. Upon a bureau, with a marquetry of mother-of-pearl mosaic, which had

energy analogous to that latent in the accumulated stuff of studios. To attenuate the experience of things "out of order," to observe and defy habituated movements toward easy categorization (hence disposability) was one way of exploring a tension that excited my intuitive process. Tim Edensor describes this energy of waste material potential as the "affordances" of refuse material. He writes:

> In inverting the ordering processes of matter, the wasted debris of dereliction confounds strategies which secure objects and materials in confined locations, instead offering sites which seem composed of cluttered and excessive stuff, things which mingle incoherently, objects whose purpose is opaque, and artifacts which have become, or are becoming something else. (Edensor, 317)

What I think of as process, tinker or vignette sculptures, *Acculturations*, *Perfume Towers* and *The Learning Shelf* are hybrid assemblages of readymade objects and fragments that play with the visual richness supplied by a profuse inheritance: the vastly replicated consumer goods of global import, "Made in China" objects available in warehouse boxes and dollar stores, and their later appearance as discarded or secondhand objects in flea markets. In some of these objects I found surprising resonance with

Acculturations: Catch a Habit, 2011

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already fallen out in places in left behind only yellowish little grooves and depressions filled with crusted glue, was lying a great and bewildering omnium-gatherum: a mound of scraps of paper, closely covered with writing, pressed down with a paperweight of marble turned green and having an egg-shaped little knob; some sort of ancient tome in a leather binding and with red edges; a lemon, so dried up that it was no bigger than a hazelnut; a broken-off char arm; a wine glass with some kind of liquid and three dead flies, covered over with a letter; a bit of sealing wax; a bit of rag picked up somewhere; two quills, dirty with ink and as dried out as consumptives; a toothpick, perfectly yellowed, which its owner had probably been picking his teeth with even before Moscow had been invaded by the French." (Gogol, 109-110)

Acculturations: Canadiana, 2011

images from my childhood in Hong Kong: in Avon perfume bottles, the pastoral ladies of music book illustrations for the piano and bedroom wallpaper vignettes; in timeworn framed pictures, the characters from translated storybooks. The process of making with these found fragments have unexpectedly led me to a deeper appreciation of what the influence of a colonial and cross-cultural upbringing has had on my sensibilities and methods. It has triggered an excavation of my history in negotiating layers of translations as a daily practice, in continuous attempts to reflect names, images, ideas and feelings back and forth between languages and cultures, and to observe the changes that arise in this process: the elisions, contortions, embellishments and syntheses that happen through translation. I have thus become self-consciously aware of adaptation and hybridization as constitutive strategies in my visual praxis.

I am not alone in being attracted to objects that function as a medium for channeling memories.[4] In an observation on her project to distill the sentimental essence of things she loved (by boiling them into soups), Diane Borsato remarked of these sentimental objects that "[…]the magic […] was in the presence of the objects themselves, in their existence as whole, unique, touchable, heavy *things*. I miss them, their *thingness*, and mourn for them terribly, despite having these concentrated jars of broth." (Borsato, 3) The artist Carol Wainio writes of her research on Walter Benjamin that it was the "unremarkable sensory matter of the everyday—that which slips *unnoticed and un-*

[4] In Yann Martel's story "The Vita Aeterna Mirror Company: Mirrors to Last till Kingdom Come," the narrator relays his grandmother's ceaseless recollection of life events conduced by interacting with her collection of objects: "Every object in her house was infused with an indwelling psyche that spoke to her of somebody or something from her long life. […] My grandmother lived alone in her village on the south shore of the St. Lawrence, but in fact her small house was a bustling metropolis of spirits." (Martel, 207)

registered into memory—that constitutes "experience," […] as an unconscious absorption rooted in the mentality of a slower time." (Wainio, 2)

The Learning Shelf, 2011

In my efforts to process materials more conscientiously, I have accumulated many objects requiring time and effort for their care. For ecological, economic, sentimental and aesthetic reasons, the use of salvaged materials could become an increasingly ineluctable choice. Thus have I also become acquainted with the behavior of hoarding—the practice of excessive collecting in hopes of accruing value or repurposing materials one already has, often occasioned by experiences and traumas of loss, in response to previous societal conditions of scarcity and internalized values of being frugal.[5]

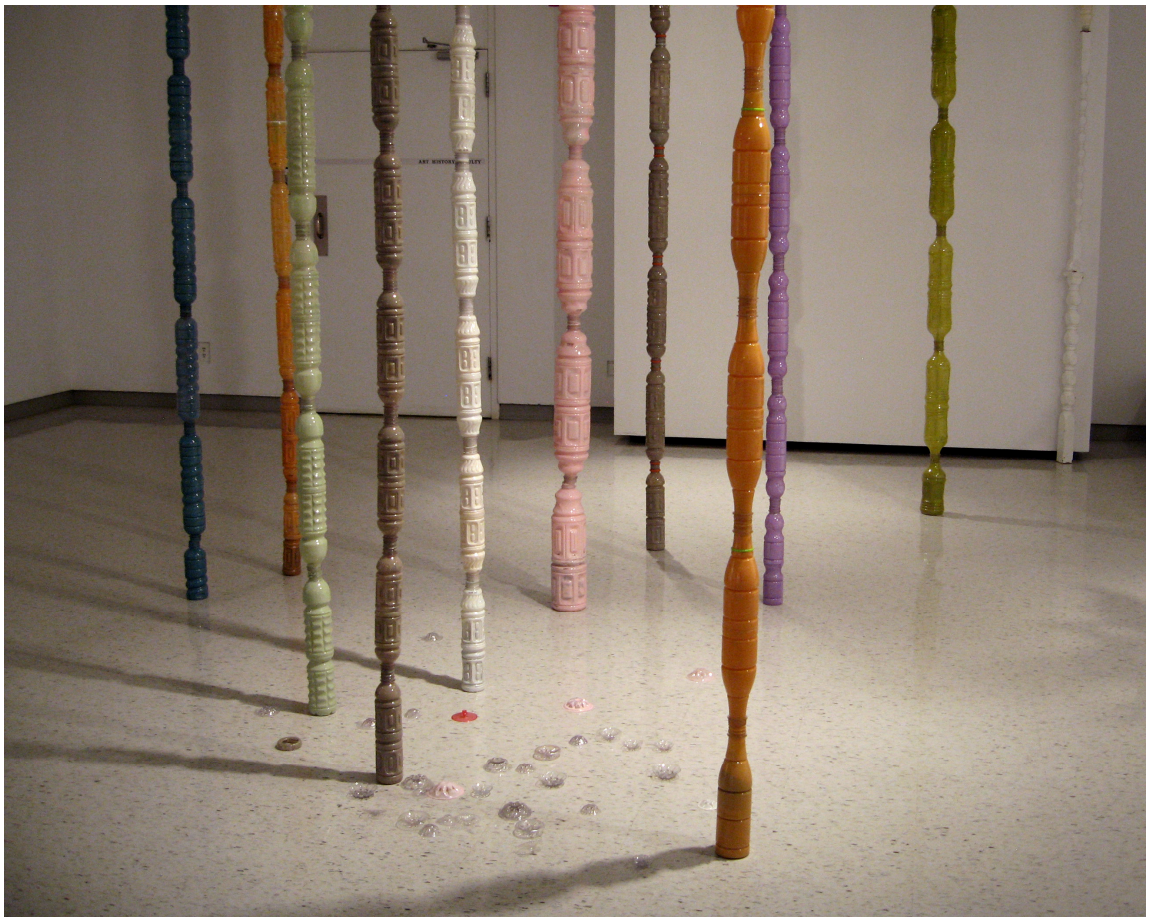
Perfume Towers, 2011

Stacking forms: *The referents*

One of the media through which I began to explore the phenomenon of collecting was the use of plastic beverage bottles. Plastic bottles are artifacts submerged in the obviousness of daily life. They are sold as units conveying what we drink, wholly disposable and nearly invisible but to those who collect them for recycling and those who design them.

[5] Reporting on the TV show *Hoarders*, Virginia Heffernan writes, "Hoarding and narrative seem to go hand in hand," quoting a therapist on the show, "They have a story about every single thing they touch."
In artist Song Dong's project titled "Waste Not/"Wu Jin Qi Yong," he worked with his mother, taking her forty years' worth of objects collected from daily life in the belief that these things would eventually be put to use, and displaying them in a massive installation.

In fashioning gathered bottles into totem-like columns, I wanted to draw attention to the materials and forms we come into contact with on a daily basis. With installation of *The referents* in a forest-like formation, my intention was to transform and make visible something camouflaged by familiarity, to contextualize the endless replication,



The Referents, 2011

homogenization, and mechanizing characteristics of mass production and consumption.

In conversation, my brother and I had recollected a figure from our childhood: a lady who used to sit surrounded by many upright bottles by the bus stop near our flat. These large and small bottles were filled with water and some were stripped of their labels. She was a fixture of that street, the bottles standing by her like little sentinels, and no one found her odd as they waited for the bus and avoided trekking into her wares. I remember my

Constantin Brancusi's *Infinite Column*

curiosity about her display; it took up a good part of the street. I knew nothing more about her except that she did not appear to be selling anything.

In the bottles I began noticing subtle flourishes and variations in structure and material. The morphology of bottle forms varied across times, regions and countries. With closer scrutiny one could create a visual taxonomy to cross-index drinks companies, times and locations of manufacture. All of these formal considerations continued my dialogue with modernism's aesthetics. I have long found Constantin Brancusi's *Infinite Column* powerfully enigmatic, its climbing presence (though inevitably a fragment) communicative of something of the possible and poetic rather than an affirmation of endless rational progress. So much of learning happens through forms and representations that persist, even when associated meanings change. The repeating, modular form resounds in the familiar hand-turned and machine-turned details of rail banisters and front porches. However imbued with default meanings or made invisible by quotidian use, images are nevertheless adaptable. I am interested in this polysemic potential, in making critical and creative use of borrowed and inherited forms.

Doilies: handcrafted work and copying in the *Graft* series

What does it mean to "know" something? Let me consider this question in the case of doilies. For a long time I knew the doily for its utility value to me as an artist: as a delicate paper collage element, then as an embossed plastic sheet with patterns that could be mono-printed pleasingly. Both of these objects were inexpensive and mass-produced. When I began frequenting thrift stores in Saskatoon, I was struck by the ubiquity of a third kind of doily: a flimsy, filigree object that had been painstakingly fabricated by

hand. Exchangeable for quarters and loonies, they were in great abundance and variety. Were these a point of origin, exemplars of the authentic or unique of which the dollar store doilies were derivative representations? As singularly crafted works, the handcrafted doily was a very different object materially from the replicable and homogenous readymade objects of mass production. To complicate matters though, handcrafted doilies were also copied from patterns and designs. By which factor—material, type, or form, do we designate or stabilize meaning and value?

Paper and handcrafted doilies collected in the

From the anecdotes people tell, doilies made by their foremothers have long been relegated to the status of unfashionable heirlooms, stored away in piles in the back corners of closets and in boxes in mildewy basements. They were not valued very much even as newly made objects, in comparison with woven blankets and knit sweaters or other such home-crafted items of utility that had some economic value in exchange. As a traditional and communal form of exchange, the sharing of knowledge and experiences of mastering a skill was passed orally from mothers, aunts and grandmothers to young women, and new designs and patterns were shared with friends. Recalled as a familiar after-dinner scene before the advent of television, the gendered labour of knitting, crocheting, tatting and cutwork kept mothers and grandmothers busily stooped over their delicate toils while conversation and narratives flowed around them simultaneously.

In the local history of Saskatchewan, handcrafted work exists somewhat inconsequentially in mainstream culture, classed as hobbyist or amateur activity not usually performed for commercial gain or recognition[6]. When I asked Joyce at the flea market how long it took her to make the two doilies I bought from her she said, “Eleven

[6] For a context of public perception of handcrafted work as “the lowly arts,” see Sandra Flood’s discussion in Chapter 2, “Historiography: a new and fresh utterance.” (49-53)

hours for that one, and two days for this." She charged me eight dollars. I felt like I was committing robbery. The material evidence of this scene attests to the widespread phenomenon of such domestic production. These doilies attracted and intrigued me; undervalued though they may now be, the doilies presented concrete embodiments of feminine labours of love and transmuted time. They served decoratively to frame bread and other foods; to safeguard surfaces from oil and scratching; to register surprising memories as when a child, encountering a doily stiffened with sugar instead of starch, licks one in secret. They served symbolically as a sign of care. In the conventions of doily making, the formal qualities of geometric and symmetric abstraction are highly regarded. In making such humble objects strive toward aesthetic autonomy, doily makers defied in a small way the premium placed on utility and necessity ingrained by times and conditions of scarcity.

3d doily, 2011

To return to the question of representations, there are rituals and concepts of copying associated with processes of learning through mimesis, translation, and traditions of honoring that are predicated on principles different from notions of facsimile replication under an individualist, proprietary intellectual property paradigm. The iconography of religious painting and architectural traditions of the orthodox and catholic churches are both examples of the former, as is the practice of copying in the production of Chinese calligraphic painting. Carol Wainio's research into the circulation of picture book illustrations, in which familiar characters from folk narratives were copied by hand or other technological processes across centuries and countries, offers another interesting example that perplexes the notion of "authenticity" as well as the relationship of "origin" and "copy". She quotes from Walter Benjamin's *The Storyteller*:

> […] Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the tales, it is

> the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers. (Wainio, 5)

Throughout my work with doilies I practiced copying. In the case of *3d Doily* made with pipe cleaners, the sculptural object in its skeletal, droopy polyhedron form strives to be an all-around symmetric and intricate doily. Its shadowy, projected counterpart plays with the concept of types and copies but produces the possibility of different presences found only in an unexpected spatial translation.

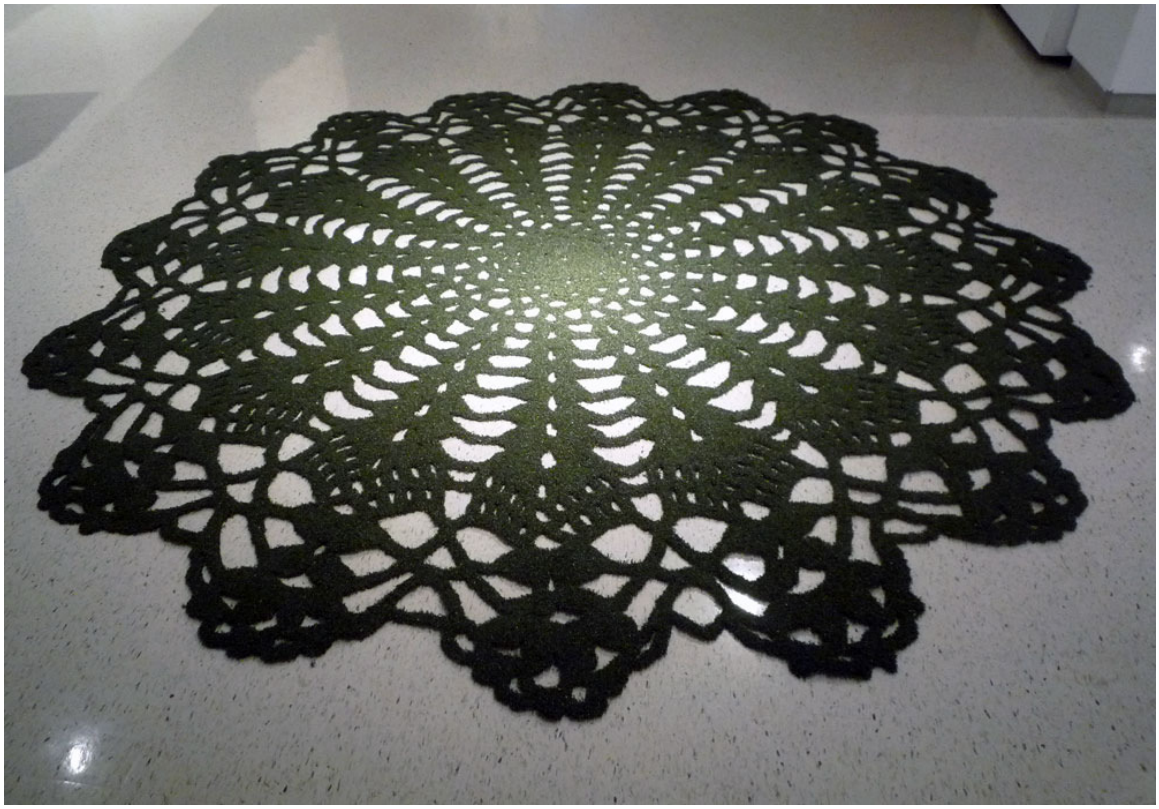
3d Doily gallery installation, 2011

The *Graft* series of drawing and Astroturf doilies spoke to the repetition and physicality of domestic craft production. Craft by its practice inherently proposes values of care[7] and material connection counter to a culture of rapid succession in commodity consumption and disposability. To celebrate and honour this tradition of the handmade doily, I translated the symmetrical patterns into objects and presences that would occupy space and command attention. In the drawing, the trace paper's translucent quality relates to the delicate character of tatted and cutwork. An intentional defamiliarization was set up by its apparent fragility and unframed, exposed installation.

[7]In the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles' Manifesto for Maintenance Art, she proposed the performing of every day activities—including and in particular those actions of care and maintenance associated with the gendered, unremunerated labour of homemaking and other invisible and traditionally discounted work as a site for valuation and critical art practice.

The Astroturf doilies were projected, drawn and cut. Neatly cropped into the pattern of the doily, the forms could allude to topiary mazes of Victorian gardens or crop circles. The use of Astroturf made an interesting material tension: its ersatz reference to permanently green and uniform-looking grass is a synthetic expression of controlled industrial production; its placement on actual grass sharpened the distinction of its material designation as banal and unnatural. On some level *Graft* encapsulated my experiences of geographic and cultural dislocation, and I intend to continue using the pieces in contexts and sites beyond the space of the gallery to render gestural a work that looks complete on a gallery floor. This possibility continually enforces the process of making, moving and minding art and the forms of agency it enables.

Graft, 2010



Graft, 2011

A work history and "Work less, Garden more!"

The process of fabricating the Astroturf doilies felt arduous at times in that it involved a fair amount of repetition. While performing the act of continuously cutting I considered the products of waste material, essentially the negative residue of work, devised counting systems to bolster morale, and achieved a level of immersion in the process. Eventually I prided myself on the increasing speed of carrying out the task. This made me recall my mother's pride in her speediness: "Look how fast I knit," she used to say as I watched her needles go and go. I would study the crisscrossing popped-up veins on her hands as she wrote out hundreds of drafts for report cards, and then wrote out the "good copies." She had been teaching since she was eighteen, and without official recognition of her teaching qualifications in Canada, she taught part-time in extracurricular programs, holding down at one period seven part-time teaching jobs simultaneously. My mother's incessant busy-ness and her pride at industry were engendered by the experiences in her life. At the age of thirteen she began to take in piecework that was paid by the pound for a factory manufacturing parts for dolls, working successively in many factories, packaging, soldering, producing radios and other electronic parts. It was not until I was in the process of making this work and *The referents* that I began to ask her more detailed questions about where she had worked, what she did, what the conditions were like.

To trigger her memory, she found and showed my father and me a handwritten document of her work history from the time she entered the workforce until shortly before marriage. In the sixties and seventies Hong Kong was a powerhouse of export commodity production. My mother's personal work history detailed social conditions that were not unique. The repetitive, mechanistic and tedious work of divided, unskilled labour was the sphere of work available to young women workers. She told me stories about looking through a microscope all day, about doubling up on eight-hour work shifts, about ten-minute company lunch breaks and speeded-up conditions. *A Work History* is an enlarged facsimile reproduction of her handwritten document and a portal to understanding the

personal experiences and social history that was formative of my mother's identity and informative of the values she had tried to impart to me.[8]

Image of weeding in *Cat + Doily*, 2011

A related but different work that also engages reproductive labour occupies the other end of the gallery. *Cat + Doily* was shot on Super 8 film, hand-developed and transferred to video format for editing. The work represented my foray into cinema as a medium to study the fleeting, intangible and irresistible qualities of affect and nostalgia, excited by images in sequence. I have long desired to experiment with a medium that unfolds rather than distills (as in the case of my previous work in painting and drawing media), and one that is pliant in narrative generativity. The use of film provided a time-based means of presenting in mesmerizing progression the variety and accumulation of handcrafted doilies, to imbue them with an animism expressive of my enthusiasms. Setting the film sequence—with a minor difference in reversing four shots—to entirely different sets of music and presenting them in a looping sequence creates an affective and cultural destabilization for the viewer, who is irrelevant to the cat. This question of inter-species and inter-subjective relevance and imagined irrelevance lingers as a residue of my work. In the film, the experience of different aural sequences changes the registering of image, pace and mood of its reception, thereby refracting and making perceptible the artifice of composing a visual experience. To "watch" the film through a set of headphones makes

[8] In "Notes from a Recent Arrival" Lucy Lippard writes of the power of memory "take up the task" of defining culture and identity. She wrote: "If history comes from above and outside, from teachers and governments, stories are told from the inside and at ground level. When governments and dominant culture proves inadequate, grandmothers become the authorities."

for the possibility that a viewer may see only one version of the film. This randomization renders differentiation a latent potential that may be encountered by chance or by spending more time with the work.

In shooting the film I recruited the help of my friend, an avid gardener, fellow appreciator of doilies and an environmental activist. In a way the film is a tribute to her life in retirement. She proposes and practices the motto "Garden more, Work less," to take time daily to observe her environment, to weed and cultivate, to be active outside the frameworks of institutional concerns, to support creative work and appreciate the ways of our furry friends.

Time in care and play

In installing *Homework* I am structuring a spatial experience that resists being easily consumable. Visual tensions are created with the intent of suspending the act of looking, to occasion time for more attentiveness to various material legacies. To perturb our comfort with the preciously discreet art object characterizing the display conventions of galleries (and retail), I try to make tangible the artifice of play and selection when determining how many of intermediate steps and provisional structures will remain visible in the gallery. I want to engage the audience with the displacements and disappearances normalized in the process of rationalizing which informs much of our behaviour and understanding.

This raises the question of legibility. What is readable to whom? In *Homework*'s aggregation of material vocabularies, references to art history, everyday objects of outmoded fashion, and use of languages other than English, what is accessible across a spectrum of subject positions and identifications is a proposition for the audiences' acts of translation. In spite of the roles and memberships assigned to us by the many systems of classification we live within, differences are not definitively characterized by what is labeled or visible. Audiences will almost certainly not arrive at a uniform understanding.

In employing material differences that simultaneously charm and repulse, I am practicing a rather "bratty" kind of craftiness. I have tried to find ways of working with craft that can seduce, jar and articulate relationships between practices of making that have very real consequences in human lives. Working with notions and materials of craft has afforded a framework in which to reconsider the hierarchies of expertise and taste in relationship to historic and social differences in class, gender, race, ability and age. Widely traditionally practiced as the "useful arts," handcrafted work is currently proliferating through freely shared how-to recipes, online Do-It-Yourself tutorials, and meet-up crafting groups. The medium of craft offers a potentially democratizing model of relating to material predicated neither on consumerism or commodification primarily, but on small-scale labour and material agency in creating and learning.

In appointing herself the role of "eccentric researcher" artist Diane Borsato brings together two notions central to her art: the agency of artists and the choice of where to direct attention. Articulating the motivation for her work, she wrote:

> It seems to me that since I'm an artist and can assign myself any task, I have a responsibility to perform the kinds of meaning-making activities—with strict attention and purpose—that few money earners have the luxury to afford. (Borsato, 3)

Art can invite, with curiosity and playfulness, audiences to enterprises of "attention and purpose" that challenges the commodification of identities and cultures. In coming to the conclusion of this paper I want to tarry with these other ways of valuing beside and beyond the discourse of market exchange and endless growth predominating in our culture. These ways of valuing are proposed by the practice of craft, by a concern for the wellbeing of our material, physical, and social relationships; they take seriously the possibility that investiture of time in care and play confers value.

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